



62 Snitching in the Torah

Chananya Weissman

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Societal trends indicate that those who are accosting others for not obeying tyrannical restrictions based on dubious science will soon take the next step and inform on them to authorities. This is the norm in authoritarian regimes, and it has become increasingly common in what used to be known as the free world. It is only a matter of time before "religious" Jews become susceptible to this as well (it's already happening in some places). Anything can be rationalized in the name of "saving lives", especially when such behavior is the societal norm.

As always, the Torah is rich with insight for those who are interested in being guided by it *before* making up their minds. Those who make up their minds first and then seek sources to support themselves can always find or finagle something ("we have to protect lives, case closed"). Those who seek the truth will find a harmonious balance between seemingly conflicting sources to achieve a balanced perspective.

Sometimes, though, the sources will be so clear that one must be completely biased and intellectually dishonest to take the other side. That is the case when it comes to snitching. I hope this essay preempts religious Jews from taking the wrong side and then justifying it after the fact when social pressure demands it of them.

To be clear, this does not refer to cases of "לא תעמוד על דם רעך", "do not stand idly by while your fellow's blood is being spilled". If a person is being physically attacked, or a spouse or child is being abused, for example, we have a biblical duty to rescue the victim. If a doctor is negligent or is conducting medical experiments on patients, he must be reported.

However, we must not be misled into extending this concept beyond incontrovertible, direct assaults on human life. We must not redefine benign human behavior as a potential murder in progress and report those who engage in such behavior, particularly when it is a secular government behind the push to inform on people. Such governments historically have never had the greater good in mind when encouraging widespread snitching - only their own.

Let's review a small but representative sample of pertinent sources.

1) Chazal teach that the Jews in Egypt were persecuted at least in part because they had informers. (Shemos 2:14, Rashi, from the Midrash)

Although it is easy for us to view Moshe as the hero for killing an Egyptian who was beating a Jew, at the time it was surely controversial. Moshe's actions might have brought retribution upon everyone else. It could easily have been rationalized that Moshe had acted recklessly and endangered others, and turning him in was the responsible thing to do for the benefit of society.

However, Chazal teach us that not only was this NOT the right thing to do, informing on Moshe was the sort of behavior that justified their suffering in the first place! Ceasing this behavior was one of the merits that brought about their redemption. (See Shir Hashirim Rabba 4:12:1)

2) Enemies of the Jews informed on Chananya, Mishael, and Azarya for not bowing to Nevuchadnezzar's golden statue. They were miraculously saved, and those who informed on them were put to death in their place. (Daniel Chapter 3)

While this story does not directly relate to Jews informing on other Jews for reasons that can be rationalized, the moral justice in the informants being put to death in their place jumps off the page.

3) The second Bais Hamikdash was destroyed in part because of the incident with Kamtza and Bar Kamtza, in which the latter informed on the Jews. (Gittin 55B)

The main takeaway for purposes of this discussion is that the consequences of harboring informants could not be greater. Jews snitching on other Jews is directly responsible for all the suffering we have experienced for thousands of years, to this very day.

4) Chazal wonder why the Jews in the time of King David would fall in battle, despite being extremely proficient in Torah. They explain that his generation had many informers. Doeg and Achitofel peddled *lashon hara*, which endangered David's life and led to the murder of an entire city of Kohanim. The people of Ke'ila and Ziv both informed on David when he was on the run from Shaul. It is evident that snitching on fellow Jews was socially acceptable at the time. Such behavior is repugnant to God, and He let the Jews fall in battle because of it.

Chazal contrast this with the time of Achav, in which everyone served idolatry, yet their enemies fell in battle before them. Why? Because they did not have informers among them. Achav went about murdering all the true prophets in his kingdom. Ovadya hid a hundred prophets in two separate caves for an extended time and supplied them with provisions. Many Jews were surely aware of this. Imagine the wagon loads of supplies that had to be prepared and delivered on a regular basis. Ovadya's "crime" against the government was an open secret, yet not one person reported on him. For this alone - in spite of their rampant idolatry - Hashem protected them in battle. (Vayikra Rabba Parsha 26 and other places)

We must appreciate the fact that David was a fugitive and Ovadya was flouting the law. Anyone who assisted David was engaging in criminal behavior, for which the punishment was execution. Those who knew his whereabouts were expected to report him immediately. So declared the government, and good citizens were expected to comply. That was the law of the land!

But God expected the Jews to ignore this law. If they saw David hiding they were expected to look the other way. Shaul could find his own enemies; they didn't need to mix in.

Similarly, Achav held true prophets to be "threats to public safety" and "enemies of the state". Jews who worshiped idolatry certainly had no affection for such people, who made it their life's mission to oppose idolatry. It would have been easy for them to accept the slanderous propaganda against true prophets and rationalize turning them in.

Nevertheless, Ovadya successfully hid and supported a hundred prophets, and no one said a word to the king. They minded their own business.

5) We live in a time when advocating for the devil is somehow seen as a virtue. The following source is an absolute checkmate to anyone who wishes to nitpick with applying the previous sources to the current situation.

In chapter 7 of Yehoshua, when the Jews were taking possession of Israel, the Jews suffered casualties in battle against the city of Ai. It was incomprehensible that a Jew should fall in battle; such was the divine protection that they were used to. Anything but a perfect victory meant that something was terribly wrong.

Yehoshua grieved and cried out to God. God notified him that there was a sinner in Israel whose crimes were responsible for the loss of divine protection. According to Chazal, Yehoshua asked God who was the sinner. God replied: "Am I your informer?" Instead, Yehoshua had to identify the culprit through a lottery. Although God made sure the lottery would point to the sinner, Achan, God did not name names. Yehoshua had to investigate and find it out for himself. (Sanhedrin 43B)

This is a remarkable source. Achan was directly responsible for the death of Jews. God had singled him out as a sinner who should be executed. Until this was done, the Jews would be vulnerable to their enemies and unable to conquer the land of Israel. Nevertheless, God scorned the very notion of being an informer! Yehoshua would have to go through a complicated procedure to identify the criminal. All this, just to drive home how despicable it is to snitch on a fellow Jew.

Those who are susceptible to thinking that it is virtuous to inform on Jews who might be violating a dubious health regulation had best take note. You are playing with serious fire. No matter how you want to try to spin it and rationalize it, the Torah sources are NOT on your side.

Indeed, there is not a single primary Torah source in which informing is spoken of in positive terms.

While there are times when criminals must be turned in, as noted in the beginning of this essay, they are *extremely* limited and clearly defined, and cannot be applied to the current situation. At the very most, if someone is definitively infectious and spreading a virus to others through reckless behavior, some form of intervention may be appropriate. (Rav Moshe Shternbuch recently made the same limited distinction, while calling for informers to be ostracized). Aside from this, people should take whatever precautions for themselves that they feel are appropriate, and otherwise mind their own business.

The Torah sources are abundantly clear that snitching on fellow Jews - even when they are sinners, even when they are criminals - is generally a most contemptible act. It is responsible for some of the greatest tragedies in our history, and we suffer from the consequences to this very day.

Many are taking the commandment to guard our lives and the lives of others to the wildest of extremes. We must remember that the Torah provides checks and balances to prevent us from going overboard with one *mitzva* to the detriment of everything else. The clear prohibition against snitching on fellow Jews is a critical reminder that not everything can be justified in the name of "public health" and "the good of society". This is especially true when a secular government with its own agenda - one that is always highly suspect - is setting the standard.

The fear and hysteria that have gripped society are leading people to rationalize monstrous things in the name of "potentially saving lives". We are dangerously close to living in fear of our friends and neighbors informing on one another for any slight infraction of regulations that can be construed as "dangerous" to others.

This is the real danger, far greater than a virus. We are at risk of tearing our society apart and driving away our divine protection. God hates informers. God hates a society in which informing on others is normative. Only God can protect us from the virus, and only God can protect us from everything else that threatens us. We cannot afford to jeopardize this divine protection.

Whatever you think about the situation and how others are dealing with it, do not inform on your fellow Jew. Period.